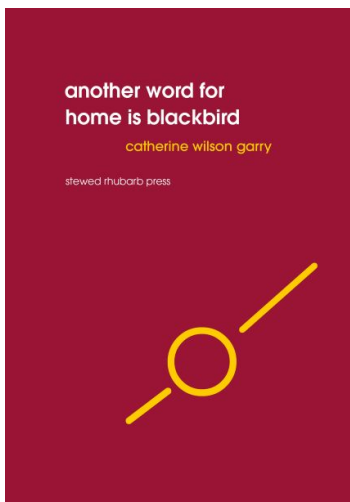


'another word for home is blackbird', by Catherine Wilson Garry

Review by Matthew Macdonald



Central to this astounding debut pamphlet from Catherine Wilson Garry is grief, revealed at once in the opening line of the collection: 'Grief does not have a landscape'. Poets often dip their pens in the ink of grief, yet it takes a delicate hand to turn this sempiternal emotion into new and insightful poetry. The poems in this pamphlet are a fantastic study on how to write on grief, which is, as the opening poem continues:

*instead, a series of rooms with
carpet that's scuffed where the door
catches it*

Throughout these poems Wilson Garry demonstrates her skill of imagery. At the surface, the image is simple, direct, mundane; and yet the mundanity of the image develops like a polaroid into something that evokes a core emotional concept, one that is as close to universal as possible.

Her ability to pull such emotionally charged imagery from the everyday is a consistent element of the collection. The clutter of an attic, a jam doughnut,

binoculars, a bottle of olive oil all take center stage against topics such as the loss of family, the intrusion of animal and human life in the world post COVID-lockdown, and the very particular kind of 'family' made from those who volunteer their time for events.

One of the powerful elements of the pamphlet is the expression of profoundly personal grief in a way that is evocative to the reader. In the poem 'October 21st 1995 (the day my father died)' the poet explores the essential experience of personal loss:

I realised I would never know what he smelled like

...

*Unless, he smelled like my perfume on his borrowed t-shirts
my smell, erasing his, like a palimpsest*

The poem expands personal feeling into something that touches every heart that has experienced family loss: 'In a way, he missed out just as much as I did'. Grief may play along these pages from poem to poem, but there is much more on display. In the poem 'Instagram refuses to remove the stolen photos (the subject is dead)', Wilson Garry's flair for the powerful couplet is shown off: 'Reclaiming something can feel / the same as protecting it.'

Wilson Garry also turns her hand to the humorous in 'Coming out of lockdown', whereby a meditation on the return to socialising following the lifting of lockdown is rudely interrupted:

Whilst in the sky, a seagull carries

A jam doughnut in the scissors of his beak

And in the chafing, opening line of the poem 'Pigeon':

Your nests are shite mate

The central poem 'Sonder', described by editor Hannah Lavery as a pro-union poem, celebrates those who society frequently ignores or belittles. The poet's soft hand is equally loving as it is indicting of the world:

I want the world to hold you better.

For your joy to be unshakeable,

for the streets to float with the

faces you hit with your everyday miracles.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the title of the pamphlet, birds are common sights across these pages, both directly in poems such as 'Jackdaw', 'Pigeon', 'Magpie' and 'Blackbird', and indirectly as in 'Coming out of lockdown'. The birds are always treated as important, as central.

In 'Birdwatching I', the juxtaposition between humanity, considered a source of power, and the birds, presented in their exquisiteness, is outlined:

*I see him
stare through the window
wondering if he is conscious
of the weight he has attached
onto such hollow bones*

This disparity is flipped in 'Birdwatching II', with the bird given full power and the human reduced to hollow and fragile parts: 'It is about the way our lives are so small // so painfully small'.

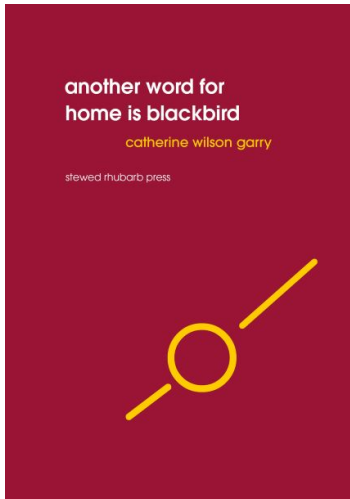
While grief starts the pamphlet, love finishes it, with the poem 'Blackbird' interweaving the title line as if to profess the circularity of the two:

*He told
Me that another word for home
Was blackbird
...
I am thankful
For the blackbirds we have
found together*

Like the multiforms of grief shown in the different poems, love appears in many forms throughout the collection, such as romantic love in 'Blackbird', or platonic love in 'Olives in St Giles Cathedral'. In the latter poem, the unexpected union of volunteers and the little moments of sharing between them is given centre stage, encapsulating the feeling of the pamphlet as a whole:

*How we often speak to each other
in such quiet gestures we have to turn our backs
from the magnitudes they contain*

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